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REMARKS
ON
THE USE OF ALCOHOL
FOR THE
PREPARATION OF MEDICINES.



BOSTON:
PRINTED BY JOHN WILSON, 21, SCHOOL STREET.
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IN a number of the States in this country, laws have been passed prohibiting the sale of alcohol, except for medicine and the arts. In these States the apothecaries have become its only regular venders, and some of them have availed themselves of the opportunity thus afforded to retail it to the tippler. This practice partially defeats the operation of the law, and thus threatens to be a public nuisance. The question has naturally arisen, Whether alcohol is a necessary article of the *Materia Medica*; and, if so, to what extent? Whether, for example, it is not employed in many cases where other articles might be substituted with propriety, and even with advantage?

The principal uses for which alcohol is employed in medicine are, *first*, As a Stimulant; *second*, As a Menstruum; *third*, As an Antiseptic.

As a stimulant, it is not so necessary as might at first view appear. When it is employed, for ex-

ample, to revive a person who is much exhausted, the distilled aromatic herbs, or a mixture of the essential oils, would answer. Peppermint-water and the other aromatic waters, by increasing the proportion of the essential oils, may be made as strong a stimulant as can be swallowed without excoriating the throat. These may often, therefore, be very properly substituted for brandy. For some other cases, the preparations of ammonia are more proper. Their action is more rapid; they possess greater stimulant powers; and the quantity required is therefore less.

Second, as a menstruum, alcohol is employed for extracting the virtues of medicinal plants, and dissolving medicinal resins. The substance, being infused in alcohol a certain time, imparts its properties, or a portion of them, to the liquid; which is then administered, sometimes in a pure state, and sometimes diluted with water. Many people are not aware, that, when they take a glass of elixir proprietatis or of tincture of rhubarb, they swallow two ounces of strong rum. Yet delicate females, and even children, are made to take these daily, and thus become habituated to the use of alcoholic stimulants. The danger arising from such practices in some inflammatory complaints must be very great.

The medicinal resins for which alcohol is used as a solvent are aloës, myrrh, guaiacum, &c. The tincture formed by the combination of alcohol and

the first two of these is the famous "Elixir Pro." which, in former times, every good mother thought herself obliged to prepare and keep for the benefit of her young family. Many an unconscious mother has brought on symptoms of violent fever by intoxicating her offspring with these insidious articles. Now, for these there are substitutes, which may be employed in the greater number of instances. An infusion of rhubarb in water, with some aromatic, is a better medicine than the alcoholic preparation in three cases out of four. Aloës may be used as an extract in pills, and may be employed in the simpler state of powder, and even in decoction; so that there are, in fact, very few, if any, cases where the spirituous preparation is required. It is a common opinion, indeed, that tincture of aloës and myrrh, or elixir proprietatis, is an excellent remedy for colic. If it be used in a colic from indigestion, the astringent property of the alcohol may, by contracting the stomach on undigested food, increase the pain; and the same is true of brandy, gin, and other forms of alcohol. If, again, it be used for wind-colic, or pain from flatulence, drinks actually hot, as hot peppermint-water, or even simple hot water, are preferable. Tincture of cinchona, or "tincture of bark," as it was formerly called, contains less tonic power than may be found in the preparations of quinine; and the same may be said of most of the bitter tinctures, as calumba and cascarilla. Tincture of red lavender poured

upon loaf-sugar has been a favorite cordial with young ladies who wish to fortify their stomachs against any particular emergency, and it is notorious that this indulgence has been a very frequent origin of tippling. If, instead of taking lavender to relieve the stomach, they omitted the use of sugar-plums and *bon bons*, they might experience neither the disposition for, nor the ill consequences arising from, alcoholic articles. Stoughton's elixir, which is the same as the tincture of gentian, was regularly introduced into the drawing-room during the last generation to give keenness to the appetite for an approaching feast. But at last it was discovered, that, by overstimulating the empty and unprotected organ, and producing a sense of satiety before any food was taken, instead of quickening the appetite or aiding the digestion, it blunted the one and enfeebled the other. Our epicures, having sagaciously observed these disagreeable effects, have proposed to tickle and awaken the stomach by the introduction of a large cold oyster or two. The best substitute for both of these will be found in half a glass of water, fresh as it comes from the spring, and not spoiled by ice. The cases above mentioned will perhaps be thought sufficient to show how easy it often is to find substitutes for alcoholic medicines.

There is a class of preparations, revealed by science, which promises great advantages as a substitute for the tinctures. In the number of the

“Boston Medical and Surgical Journal” for September 5, 1849, will be found an account of a mode of producing a fermentation, by which is generated a substance containing the properties of medicinal articles in a convenient state for administration and preservation. By adding to an infusion of senna a due proportion of sugar, a fermentation is generated which produces a vinous fluid, so weak as not to possess any important stimulant properties, and yet strong enough to prevent decomposition. This preparation we have tried, and find elegant, convenient, and safe. It cannot be used for the purposes of intoxication, on account of its weakness and medicinal effect. Various preparations — as, for example, aloës, opium, gentian, rhubarb, and many others most necessary in medical practice — may be made in the same way. Perhaps it will be thought that they are no better than tinctures; but, in fact, they have not the strength of tinctures. No extraneous alcohol is introduced. We recommend to the enterprising apothecary the preparation of these products of fermentation, as promising much advantage to the medical practitioner, and a valuable improvement in economy to the apothecary himself.

A third use of alcohol is to prevent decomposition. For this purpose it is added to some infusions, decoctions, and syrups. The two former of these should always be prepared recently and without alcohol; and the last, if properly made, do not require it.

Physicians have been among the most forward, persevering, and able advocates of temperance. Without their aid, the temperance reformation could never have proceeded as far as it has. But it appears there is an evil existing under their eyes, and, in a measure, maintained by their prescriptions, which has become formidable to the public morals. If they would take the matter into consideration, and satisfy their own minds when alcoholic preparations are really required, their prescriptions would undoubtedly be much more restricted than they now are in the employment of the tinctures. The facts so briefly stated above will probably be sufficient to convince them, that they might, with a very little sacrifice of convenience, employ substitutes more beneficial to the patient, and less objectionable on the ground of temperance; and they would have the satisfaction of believing, that they have removed from the reach of their patients an article which might, by slow and insidious steps, have ultimately led to their ruin.

NOTE. — Some of the Pharmacopœias direct that spirit should be added to infusions to prevent decomposition, when they are to be kept any length of time. This may be accomplished without alcohol, by placing the infusion, while hot, in a closely-stopped bottle, and keeping it in a cool place.

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